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THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT SAYS THE CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY IS A TYRANNICAL CULT THAT RECALLS THE COUNTRY'S DARK HISTORY. THE SCIENTOLOGISTS SAY IT'S THE GERMANS WHO HAVEN'T CHANGED. IN AN INCREASINGLY BITTER BATTLE, TWO POWERS COLLIDE OVER THE MEANING OF FREEDOM AND THE BURDEN OF THE PAST.

BY RUSS BAKER

CLASH OF THE TITANS

Helmut Kohl may be chancellor of Germany, but he isn't accustomed to getting mail from the likes of Dustin Hoffman. Nonetheless, in the January 9, 1997, edition of the *International Herald Tribune*, he was the target of an open letter, signed by the Academy Award winner and 33 other prominent entertainment industry figures, including actress Goldie Hawn, director Oliver Stone, talk-show host Larry King, producer Aaron Spelling, Warner Bros. co-chairman Terry Semel and author Gore Vidal. The celebrities expressed grave concern about recent ominous developments in Germany. Invoking Adolf Hitler and the "unspeakable horrors" of the Holocaust, they worried whether the heirs to the Third Reich's bitter legacy were once again headed down a potentially tragic path. This time, though, the victims were not Jews. They were members of a controversial and little-understood group, the Church of Scientology. Protesting "the invidious discrimination against Scientologists," the missive concluded, "This organization oppression is beginning to sound familiar...like the Germany of 1936 rather than 1996."

Kohl's petitioners are not Scientologists. Indeed, many are Jewish. So is Bertram Fields, the powerful Hollywood lawyer who drafted the letter, solicited the signatures, and paid \$56,700 of his own money for the ad space. Fields, who has represented Dustin Hoffman, Michael Jackson, and Warren Beatty, says he got the idea when he learned that a German youth group was promoting a boycott of *Mission: Impossible* in the summer of 1996 because its star, Tom Cruise, is a Scientologist. Cruise happens to be Fields's client, as is another Hollywood powerhouse and Scientologist, John Travolta.

It is unclear how much the signatories, 12 of whom are Fields's current clients, know about Scientology, Germany's position on the group, or even the contents of the letter before they signed it. According to Hollywood sources, it's common practice among industry types to ask friends to lend their names to literature about a cause, sight unseen. (One signer, director Constantin Costa-Gavras, publicly retracted his name from the letter after a more "careful reading.") But even Fields doesn't seem to want to peer too deeply

into the controversy. When a German reporter told Fields that Scientology was “dictatorial,” he dismissed the charge, saying that “Orthodox Judaism is dictatorial, the Catholic Church is dictatorial.” He insists “these people are being discriminated against radically for something they believe in. I’m not advocating Scientology, and I don’t know a hell of a lot about it. I know that the two people I know [Cruise and Travolta] who are in it have really straightened out their lives”

But why such a public (and expensive) show of support? “This is the way you buy goodwill in Hollywood,” says one insider. “You take out ads.” Indeed, according to the source, Fields’s motives are obvious to any industry veteran. “Just look at the grosses of Cruise and Travolta’s movies. They’re the most successful stars in Hollywood. It’s what they said in Watergate: Follow the money. Or let me put it to you this way. Fifty-six thousand dollars is a miscellaneous billing for the legal bills that Cruise and Travolta generate.”

What has become an international incident involving celebrities developed out of an ongoing, highly contentious debate that has recently included verbal tussles between the U.S. and German governments. The accusations against Germany first came to the attention of Americans in another ad campaign in the *New York Times*, this time paid for by the Church of Scientology. Readers of the Paper of Record were greeted by a series of ten full-page ads (at a cost of \$60,000 each) last fall, decrying a return to jackbooted thuggery in Germany. PRACTICING RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE, read the first ad’s headline, an eagle and swastika insignia menacing below. “You may wonder why German officials discriminate against Scientologists,” the ad stated. “There is no legitimate reason, but then there was none that justified the persecution of the Jewish people either.” The ads recalled how Jewish children, teachers, and workers were stigmatized in the first days of the Third Reich. Today, the ads charged, Scientologists were experiencing a similar fate—losing jobs, being harassed, and being excluded from civil service.

Undoubtedly, Scientology isn’t about to win any popularity contest in Germany. A general alert about the organization has been sounded, from the Lake of Constance to the Baltic Sea, which may seem odd to most Americans, who know little—and often care less—about the church that was founded in the U.S. by the late science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. But Scientology is a newer phenomenon in Germany, a much smaller country with a relatively homogeneous population. There, the general consensus is that the Church of Scientology uses religion to cloak a dangerous cult movement with the look and feel of big business.

In fact, German officials respond to the group’s highly publicized charges with a reciprocal blast—that it is *Scientology* that bears similarities to extreme political movements in Germany’s past, such as Nazism and communism. Therefore, they argue, the organization constitutes a legitimate security risk. “Scientology is a new kind of extremism,” says Dr. Jurgen Keltsch, a former Bavarian prosecutor who has devoted more than a decade to investigating the church. “If you look to the end, you have an Orwellian society.”

When Kurt Weiland, an Austrian who is a director of the Church of Scientology International in Los Angeles, is read this last quote, his response is biting: “They must be looking into their own minds, reciting their own plans for the future.” The exchange highlights the inherent irony of the battle between these two powers, each seeking to move beyond its controversial past.

On a dismal December evening, a crowd assembles outside Scientology's glass-fronted, five-story building on Hamburg's Steindamm thoroughfare. The federal minister of labor, Norbert Blum, has flown in from Bonn to address an anti-Scientology rally of the Junge Union, the youth wing of the ruling party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which called for the *Mission: Impossible* boycott. As the rain becomes heavier, party officials congregate in a tent set up for the occasion. Across the way, Scientology officials watch the proceedings from beneath their own canopy.

When Blum arrives, both sides head off for an indoor rally some blocks away. As I follow the crowd, a man approaches, takes my picture, then scurries off. Inside the lecture hall the air crackles with energy. With their prim turtlenecks and cardigans, the audience members from the Junge Union resemble a gathering of the Young Republicans. Blum launches into his trademark speech on the church: "Scientology misuses the good name of religion for a business despising men.... [It is] a criminal organization ... an imperialistic organization wanting to conquer humanity.... Democracy has to fight back against this new form of violence, of psychological terror, of suppression." The audience has grown to several hundred, and Blum is greeted with vigorous applause.

Some of the people from the Scientology tent have filtered into the hall. In the bleachers, a man with a telephoto lens points his camera almost exclusively at me. Every time I obscure my face, he puts his camera down.

It's time for questions, and the Scientologists line up one by one to give statements. Blum doesn't understand Scientology, they say. He takes its writings out of context. The two sides heckle each other, and the event abruptly ends. As I prepare to leave, an intense-looking woman with dark hair approaches. "You are Mr. Baker," she says. She identifies herself as Sabine Weber, Scientology's German spokesperson. She wants to know "what sort of story" I'm working on. I'm taken aback. I wrote one article and did a short television segment on Scientology in the U.S. several years ago, but I have never reported on the organization in Germany. The experience is doubly unnerving since one of the criticisms of the group is that it pays inordinate attention to outside observers, one of many reported mechanisms used to control its image.

Although Blum is clearly in the vanguard of the German campaign against the group, he is considered somewhat extreme by many Germans. They may agree with the essence of what he says, but they think he's fostering a hysterical environment for political gain. But as Hans-Jorg Vehlewald, a reporter for the prominent newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, explains, "You can't do wrong in Germany fighting against Scientology."

German concerns about Scientology were first expressed in the early '80s by the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, which had received scattered complaints from parishioners who were worried about the involvement of their relatives in Scientology. Former Scientologists also claimed that the group had coerced them into parting with large sums of money. In the late '80s the unease turned into full-fledged alarm when the self-described spiritual movement began appearing increasingly in business contexts—developments that critics saw as cult expansionism. "In the morning it's a company," says German parliament member Freimut Duve. "At midday it's a doctor to treat people psychologically, and in the evening it's a church."

Several states, including Hamburg, Berlin, and Bavaria, began scrutinizing complaints about aggressive real estate companies that allegedly intimidated tenants and abused employees—companies whose owners were allegedly promoting and sending large donations to the Church of Scientology. Although investigations turned up improper and, in some cases, illegal activities—in 1992 two prominent Scientologist businessmen were jailed for tax fraud—there was insufficient evidence to prove a coordinated

organization-wide pattern of racketeering. Lacking the legal grounds to prosecute or shut down Scientology, authorities began taking a variety of measures to at least stem its influence—some highly controversial, including distributing brochures warning schoolchildren about the group.

Bavaria, the southern German state known for its Oktoberfest revelry and its rock-ribbed conservatism, gained worldwide attention last November when it passed a decree requiring that all prospective civil servants fill out a questionnaire detailing any links to Scientology. The decree has drawn criticism from many Germans—including staunch critics of Scientology—who see it as a clear infringement on civil liberties. “I personally have some doubts whether the government is entitled at all to question an applicant for civil service about his religion,” says constitutional scholar Ingo Von Münch of the University of Hamburg.

University of Maryland law professor Peter E. Quint, a specialist in U.S. and German constitutional law, offers this explanation for why Bavaria thinks it can probe employees’ beliefs: The German constitution, known as the Basic Law, requires anyone in civil service to be prepared at all times to affirmatively support the “free democratic basic order.” According to Quint, “It’s not just that you aren’t against it, it’s that you have to stand up and support it.” He also cites Article 9 of the Basic Law, which states that associations “whose aims or activities contravene criminal law or are directed against the constitutional order, or the notion of international understanding shall be banned.” No court has yet evaluated the Bavarian questionnaire, although Scientology officials say they are considering a legal challenge.

The federal government in Bonn has not passed any specific legislation against Scientology, but it has registered its mounting panic. “After having conducted thorough studies on the Scientology organization,” reads one of its recent press releases, “the federal government has come to the conclusion that the organization’s pseudoscientific courses can seriously jeopardize individuals’ mental and physical health and that it exploits its members.” In the spring of 1996, the government formed an investigative commission on sects and cults, to consider possible measures against them. Made up of investigators from the German states, the commission seems to be focused primarily on Scientology. Various politicians and political parties have floated proposals to ban the group entirely, to bar members from federal civil service jobs nationwide, and to conduct a surveillance of the organization. In 1994 minister Blum introduced a decree, since overturned, stating that Scientologists could not run employment agencies.

Some Scientologists have evidently been victims of the current climate of suspicion surrounding the group. Scientology officials detail dozens of incidents aimed at its members and facilities, including graffiti, verbal insults, broken windows, and hate mail. (German authorities insist that such incidents aren’t common, that police investigate all reported incidents, and that Scientologists have standard recourse to the justice system when cases of discrimination do occur.) There have also been efforts to keep Scientologists out of political parties. Helmut Kohl’s party, the CDU, doesn’t accept Scientologists, claiming that it is a Christian party and that Scientologists say they are members of a distinct religion.

The German reaction toward Scientology has been met with cautious condemnation by such organizations as the United Nations and the U.S. State Department, which point out the hazards of government-sponsored campaigns against minority belief systems. German officials counter that Germany, of all nations, is attuned to the need to protect civil liberties. Explaining the country’s scrutiny of Scientology, a German policy paper states that “because of its experiences during the Nazi regime...German society is particularly alert toward radicalism of any kind and has set stiff standards for itself when

dealing with aggressive, extreme groups—even when the groups are small in number.” A policy like this is more common in democracies than most officials would care to admit. U.S. police agencies have long monitored “threatening” groups, but investigations are rarely made public unless arrests occur or scandals emerge. Germany is currently in the spotlight, partly because its inquiries are so visible.

In general, Germany isn’t bashful about taking action against organizations it considers cults. The Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who founded the controversial Unification Church (known to most people as the Moonies), was barred from entering Germany in 1995, though his group isn’t banned. Scientologists point out that other groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and fundamentalist Christian groups, are also regarded with suspicion.

Certainly, from the mass suicides at People’s Temple, run by the Reverend Jim Jones, to the subway chemical attacks by Japan’s Aum Shinrikyo, governments have periodically faced catastrophic circumstances at the hands of self-proclaimed churches. The question, debated increasingly in Germany, is, What measures can a society take in order to protect itself, without trampling on the individual rights of citizens?

Scientology’s response to the debate can be found on the boulevards of most German cities. On a crisp winter evening, two men and a woman stand on Berlin’s regal Kurfurstendamm. Tall, blond, and good-looking, the trio exude a clean-scrubbed confidence. They carry baskets, filled with copies of L. Ron Hubbard’s introductory text, *Dianetics: The modern Science of Mental Health*, which has sold 17 million copies worldwide, according to the book’s cover.

I strike up a conversation with one of the Scientologists, a polite fellow named Berndt. When I ask him about the German complaints about Scientology, he explains that it is all disinformation. What about complaints by former members? I ask. He suggests that perhaps they failed to follow Hubbard’s “technology” carefully enough. For success in Scientology, says Berndt, it is imperative to study and heed Hubbard’s every instruction. “If you fail to carry out one, the technology will not work for you.”

Scientology jargon, in which words like *technology* have been redefined, can take years for outsiders to master. Consequently, it is difficult—by design, some critics argue—for a non-Scientologist to explain the belief system, and its followers don’t always do a better job.

Scientology, founded in the 1950s by L. Ron Hubbard and based on his writings, is an amalgam of psychological concepts that gradually took on a religious overlay. Although Scientology has been calling itself a church since 1954, membership in other religions has been declared compatible.

People who first encounter Scientology may not think they’re dealing with a spiritual system at all. Many begin by taking free “personality tests” offered at curbside card tables, or by enrolling in management-training courses that turn out to be Scientology-sponsored, all of which eventually lead to a regimen called “auditing,” the central component of Scientological practice. In these intense counseling sessions, members are encouraged to recount sublimated experiences that may hinder their progress in life, using a device developed by Hubbard called an E-meter, which is similar to a lie detector: While the member grasps handles that measure electrical charges in the skin, an auditor watches a needle float up and down on a screen. Everything the auditee reveals, regardless of how personal, is written down and stored in Scientology’s files. The

ostensible goal of auditing is to eliminate psychic obstacles and eventually attain the state of “clear,” which at one time was the ultimate definition of a truly realized Scientologist.

But Hubbard later added higher levels of achievement, so-called Operating Thetan, or OT, levels. According to the Scientology belief system, a tyrant named Xenu ruled a galactic federation 75 million years ago. Seeking to alleviate overpopulation, he ordered his henchmen to freeze excess bodies in a mixture of alcohol and glycol and transport them by spaceships resembling DC-8 planes to earth, which Hubbard called Teegeeack. Dropped into volcanoes and bombarded with hydrogen bombs, the souls of these banished creatures, known as Thetans, began to possess humans and are the source of all human unhappiness. In order to attain superior levels of achievement and control over life, one needs to exorcise these Thetans through auditing, instruction courses, and body-purification regimens. According to Scientology buffs on the World Wide Web, John Travolta is believed to be at least an OT5, Tome Cruise an OT3 or higher, Lisa Marie Presley slightly below a clear.

The system of thought and the counseling courses are referred to as technology. “Scientology works 100 percent of the time,” reads Executive Directive No. 450, from the Religious Technology Center, the corporate entity of Scientology’s top leadership. “There has never in our history been a failure of the technology itself. The only failures have been staff or organizational failures, when the technology was not known or applied.”

Being a Scientologist is expensive. Ordinary members can spend hundreds of thousands on courses over several years. Scientology refers to these fees as “donations,” but price lists must nevertheless be strictly followed. Internal memos refer to “freeloaders” whose course fees are overdue. Some Scientologists who lack the funds to pay for courses are strongly urged to join what is called the Sea Organization, a Scientology branch whose members wear faux naval uniforms, bunk in Spartan quarters, and work long days for little pay.

Celebrities, however, are treated differently, which is consistent with Hubbard’s declaration that recruiting the famous would be crucial to the expansion of the movement (“Rapid Dissemination can be attained...by the rehabilitation of celebrities who are just beyond or just approaching their prime.”) Around the world, actors, musicians, and other glitterati take their courses at luxurious Celebrity Centres, where they see little of ordinary members.

Before and since his death in 1986, Hubbard has been revered as almost a deity by Scientologists. But former ranking members insist that he was a fraud, whose self-descriptions as a physicist and war hero were fabricated. Regardless, Hubbard and his ideas have proved seductive. His thousands of prescriptions apply to nearly all aspects of life. There are tips on studying, on marriage, on job interviews. And the auditing sessions provide members with a powerful emotional release and a sense that someone cares and is paying attention. Scientologists clearly believe they are improving themselves.

Explaining why he became a Scientologist, the former *Melrose Place* actor Jason Beghe says, “I wanted to know myself. Auditing helps you discover yourself. It’s not like sitting in a church and listening to someone preach...It’s true only if it’s true for you.” Beghe became a fervent Scientologist in 1994 when he finished the organization’s introductory detoxification regimen, which “handled all the residual drug traces and toxins in my body,” he says, “It was amazing. In just three weeks my eyesight improved by nearly 70 percent. I never looked or felt better, and my IQ went up by 16 points.” The actor, who is to appear in the upcoming movie *In Pursuit of Honor*, opposite Demi Moore, is now an OT4.

Scientology's membership numbers are not verifiable. The group claims 8 million members worldwide, a figure former staffers consider wildly inflated, especially since Scientology says it has only about 30,000 followers in Germany, which, until a decade ago, had been among its most fertile recruiting grounds. A 1995 church publication notes that there are about 50,000 clears worldwide.

Despite its effectiveness in recruiting new members, Scientology has to deal with constant public recriminations from former adherents. On one Web page after another, people who identify themselves as ex-Scientologists post personal accounts of emotional damage and financial ruin. Most legal actions in the U.S. against Scientology involve cases filed by former members with similar complaints.

Many of Scientology's legal tussles have also involved the media. Since 1991 alone the organization has sued *Time*, *Reader's Digest* and the *Washington Post* over critical articles—most of the suits were unsuccessful but cost the publications a fortune in legal fees. Overall, the growing visibility of Scientology, thanks to its celebrity members, combined with a fear of the group's litigiousness, has helped blunt criticism and press coverage. (During the reporting of this article, George was bombarded with letters and phone calls from Scientologists expressing concern about the direction the story might take. At one point, the president of the Church of Scientology International, Heber C. Jentzsch, accused me of having fraternized with people who believe the Holocaust never happened—a difficult argument to make, since my own mother escaped from Nazi-occupied Europe and some of my relatives died in concentration camps.)

Nonetheless, government investigations date back almost to Scientology's inception. In the early '70s, during an audit, the IRS discovered that Hubbard was skimming millions of dollars from the church and diverting the money into his personal Swiss bank accounts. Affairs took a more troubling turn on June 11, 1976, when the FBI discovered two Scientologists with forged IDs inside the U.S. Courthouse's Bar Association Library in Washington, D.C., after visiting hours. An FBI raid of the church's offices ensued, revealing an elaborate undercover Scientology operation to obtain government documents on the organization, with the help of members working inside the IRS, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the Drug Enforcement Administration. In 1980, 11 top Scientology officials—including Hubbard's wife—were imprisoned for infiltrating, burglarizing, and wiretapping more than 100 government and private agencies in an attempt to block investigations of the church.

Critics of Scientology contend that the spy operation was part of a larger and more sinister global plan, laid out in Hubbard's pronouncements, such as this one from 1960: "The goal...is to bring the government and hostile philosophies or societies into a state of complete compliance with the goals of Scientology. This is done by high-level ability to control and...low level ability to overwhelm."

What the German authorities see as Scientology's espionage-like aspect is one of the government's biggest areas of concern. In the mid-'80s, Bavarian officials say, they discovered that the organization kept dossiers on public figures. They also cite one of Hubbard's early policies, known as Fair Game, directed against perceived enemies of Scientology, who are known as Suppressive Persons. SPs, he wrote, "may be tricked, sued, or lied to or destroyed" and "may be deprived of property or injured by any means by any Scientologist without any discipline of the Scientologist." Scientologists claim that the policy is no longer in effect.

German authorities also worry about how Scientology officials might use the auditing files. These are, after all, an individual's deepest, most private confessions. Among Scientologists' files entered into evidence in a U.S. court case was this 1976 profile of a member: "She has quite a record of promiscuity [*sic*] in these early years.... She has masturbated regularly since she was 8 years old, mentions doing it once with coffee [*sic*] grounds (doesn't say how) and once had a puppy lick her. She slept with [a man] while he was married to her cousin."

When Hubbard's former spokesman Robert Vaughn Young left the organization and became a critic, Scientologists responded by sending his relatives a description of an alleged extramarital affair aboard a cruise ship. A Scientology spokesperson says the organization was just trying to show "what kind of character we are dealing with.... As I remember, it was with a minor." But it wasn't a minor, I recall. "So he was breaking the marriage," she says.

Scientology publications routinely accuse critics of all kinds of salacious acts, from collecting pornography to dancing nude. Scientology officials defend these tactics as being within the purview of a religion under siege.

Some critics of Scientology believe the motivation behind the organization's publicity campaign against the German government is financial. Germany refuses to grant Scientology tax exemptions accorded to religions, contending that the group is seeking to gain tax benefits. With a cash flow reported at hundreds of millions of dollars annually, Scientology is treated in Germany as a commercial enterprise. Belgium, France, Israel, Italy, Spain, and Mexico have all refused to grant the organization religious status.

Until four years ago, the United States also denied the church religious tax exemptions. In 1993, after 40 years of stubborn resistance, the agency abruptly reversed its stance. (The briefs on the decision are sealed, although Tax Analysts, a Virginia publisher of tax research materials, has filed a lawsuit to have them made public.) Scientology, which had struggled mightily for the reversal, celebrated with a lavish gala and with headlines in its in-house quarterly newspaper, *International Scientology News*, declaring that THE WAR IS OVER!

In the old port city of Hamburg, behind the locked bulletproof glass door of a downtown office building, is Scientology's enemy number one, Ursula Caberta. The woman whom a top Scientologist dubbed the "new Goebbels" is portrayed as a clawed witch in Scientology's *Freiheit (Freedom)* magazine. Caberta is the head of the city's official Scientology task force, a small full-time unit that investigates the organization. Founded in 1992, the office provides the public with information about Scientology and counseling for people who consider themselves to be victims of the group. It also tracks businesses affiliated with Scientology.

Caberta begins to lay out her concerns about Scientology, whose texts she has pored over for years with an intensity shared perhaps only by Hubbard's followers. "For me, it's like Hitler's thinking," she says, struggling with her English. "Hitler was thinking that the Aryans were going to rule the world, the *untermenschen*. The philosophy of L. Ron Hubbard is the same." She compares Hubbard's *Introduction to Scientology Ethics* with *Mein Kampf*. "People used to say of Hitler, 'He's a little bit crazy,'" she goes on. "They are saying the same thing about L. Ron Hubbard.... Germans are a little more sensitive than others, because we know what it means if people think one is 'only a crazy one.' We know what it means if this thing is one day a reality."

Philosophical concerns notwithstanding, Caberta says the city government established her office for more workaday reasons. In the late '80s, Hamburg authorities began receiving harassment complaints from tenants in buildings that were bought by Scientologists after condo conversions became legal. They claimed the new landlords were trying to oust them in order to sell the apartments for substantial profits.

According to Scientology officials, hundreds of their German companies, including real estate, head-hunting, temporary-employment, computer, and engineering firms, license the use of "technology" – Hubbard's concept and management techniques. Scientologists claim these are not church businesses but members of the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises (WISE), an entity that is legally distinct from the Church of Scientology.

Yvonne Seifert-Dreyer, a 48-year-old beautician, says she knew nothing about Scientology until a Hamburg real estate magnate and WISE member, Gotz Bräse, bought the building containing her salon and apartment. She says tenants received threatening letters and late-night crank calls. Some tenants described being shadowed by individuals who spoke loudly into tape recorders, saying, for example, "It is 10 p.m., and Mrs. Gunther is now leaving her apartment." At one point, recalls Seifert-Dreyer, the building's basement was overrun by rats. "Lab rats, not wild ones," she says. When it became clear that the tenants wouldn't budge, the management offered to pay cash rewards and moving costs for those who were willing to leave. German officials say profits flow into Scientology's coffers and believe that the techniques themselves are inspired by Scientology teachings. The Society of German Real Estate Brokers concurs and has now banned Scientologists from membership.

In Hamburg I spend several hours with former Scientologist Gitta Gerken, 46, a handsome, neatly coiffed woman who worked as a real estate agent from 1994 to mid-1995 at Bräse's real estate firm. "Bräse was the money machine for the Hamburg org," she explains, using the in-house term for a Scientology center. "Bräse's aim was to make money in Hamburg to reinforce the organization and to start businesses in other cities to reinforce other orgs-in Dusseldorf, Munich, Berlin." Although they are entitled to commissions, she says, Bräse staffers who sold an apartment were immediately pressured by co-workers to donate the money to Scientology. An office memo, for example, congratulated the staff on "fulfill[ing] the purpose of the company, by succeeding to produce a highest ever [record] ... just for Ron [Hubbard]'s birthday: Twenty-two housing units were sold in one week." Gerken, who tells of being forced to work up to 70 hours per week, says employees operated in a climate of fear and paranoia, reporting on each other to Scientology officials. (The group's publications urge members to file a "knowledge report" when they hear members or outsiders expressing criticism of Scientology.)

Gerken also says she was pressured to spend her money on more courses and auditing sessions. After she and her Scientologist husband had pumped approximately \$270,000 into the organization, she complained to a Scientology chaplain. Her husband was then given a document declaring him a PTA, a potential trouble source, for having failed to apply the Scientology rules for a happy marriage. The document, citing their names, was published in church publications.

Ralf Burmester, a Hamburg lawyer who represents former Scientologists, says many of his clients were pressured to borrow heavily to pay for courses. "They normally start with a small course, say \$40," he says, "and it becomes more and more. I have many people who spent \$60,000 to \$180,000 in one or two years."

Bräse, who was never charged with any criminal offense, denies any wrongdoing, saying tenants in Seifert-Dreyer's building were "paranoid." As for Gerken's claims: "I don't like being called a money machine," protests the businessman, who says he has converted hundreds of buildings in Hamburg. "What she means is I personally in the past bought buildings which I rented out to the church or social movements supported by the church, like a drug rehab. That's my personal decision.... What I've done in the past is use this personal purpose for motivating my employees." Scientology officials point out that none of Hamburg's investigations have led to any criminal convictions.

Several days after she approached me at the Hamburg anti-Scientology rally, I meet Sabine Weber, Scientology's chief German spokesperson, at the group's Munich headquarters in an affluent shopping district. Weber, a smart, attractive woman, supremely trained to interpret Scientology for the layperson, doesn't want me and my photographer on the premises, so we repair to a nearby restaurant. She tells me how she came to be a Scientologist ten years ago. "You wouldn't believe it," she says. "I was asked on Market Street in San Francisco if I wanted to do a personality test."

It was the auditing sessions that drew her in, she says. "I was impressed how you can recognize situations from the past that affect you in the present time." We talked about the reasons for what she perceives as a formal harassment campaign by the German government. "The problem in Germany is we don't have separation of state and church in this country," she says. "This is a Christian country, so all they understand is they have a certain type of church."

Legal experts partly concur. "It's clear there's a separation, but it's not a complete separation," says law professor Quint. Most Germans identify themselves as either Lutheran or Catholic. Those two religions are supported by taxes collected from their members by the states. Scientologists say that the government, in investigating offbeat sects, is responding to pressures from the two churches, which worry about declining membership.

But what about the separation between the Church of Scientology and WISE-affiliated real estate agents? I ask Weber. "[They] are businessmen who use the administrative technology of L. Ron Hubbard," she explains. As for Bräse, he is "just a simple member of the church. He just contributes like any other member."

When she is asked about claims of financial ruin by former members, Weber gets impatient. "It's easy to find a few people to tell that story – they're needed to fuel the campaign," she says.

Weiland, the U.S. director, is more blunt. "Usually, they squandered their money," he says, "Scientology offers an educational route.... That is no more expensive than a college education.... Yet there's much more substance, and it takes much longer to study it."

But German officials cite Hubbard's writings as proof that the organization is out to make money. The church's governing financial policy letter states, for example, that members must "make money. Make more money – make other people produce so as to make money."

"I can give you a hundred quotes for every quote they bring up that show [that what they are saying] is nonsense," says Weber. "They bring up these wonderful quotes that sound aggressive, but no Scientologists ever followed them."

Irrespective of their commitment to Scientology, some German members, whose names were provided to me by Scientology's U.S. parent organization, have faced discrimination. Though it is hard to say how many, Scientologists have lost their jobs and seen their bank accounts closed and their children ejected from schools. One such person is Gerhard Waterkamp. In 1995 he was fired from his job as a divisional general manager at a multinational automotive-supply company after his name turned up on a list of people who had taken Scientology courses. As the company explained in a letter, it did not want "the management technology of Ron Hubbard to be introduced in our company."

"The majority of companies in Germany share this attitude with us," the letter concluded, offering to write a recommendation to any company that felt otherwise. Today, Waterkamp lives in Burbank, California, where he is an executive in a Scientologist-owned market research firm.

One woman, who asks that her name not be used, say her thriving image-consulting firm began to fail after a newspaper article described her involvement with Scientology. "The story was always the same," she recalls, "that I didn't own my own company but was working for Scientology." She also provided me with a letter from her bank addressed to her husband, explaining why their account was being closed: "The Commerzbank AG categorically rejects any relation with the method and the ideas propagated by L. Ron Hubbard," it stated.

Although these examples of discrimination appear to be legitimate, other instances, including those cited in Scientology's *Times* ads, have proved to be more complex. One ad mentioned a teacher who had been fired after it was discovered that she was a Scientologist. "Scientology tells you half the story," says the German journalist Vehlewald. He says the teacher was removed from her post after being reprimanded for handing out Scientology literature to students on 12 occasions.

Still, letters like the one Monika Wieneke received in 1987 from her daughters' school can be enough to make a person leave Germany. "You did not tell me that you are a member of the Scientology group," wrote the private Catholic Sophie-Barat-Schule in Hamburg. The school informed her regretfully that her children would no longer be permitted to attend. Wieneke is now a Scientology minister in Clearwater, Florida.

Scientologist artists also tell of losing commissions from clients and being shut out of galleries when their affiliation became known. In fact, U.S. authorities were alerted to the problem in 1993 when American jazz pianist Chick Corea complained that one of his concerts was canceled in the southern city of Stuttgart after the authorities learned that he was a Scientologist. Hans-Werner Carlhoff, the head of the region's investigative teams on cults, says Corea was under consideration for a state subsidy for the concert and that talks broke down after officials learned that the celebrity promotes Scientology at his concerts.

So far, a number of cases of proselytizing by Scientologists have been documented, but they do not appear to reflect a widespread pattern. One German official tells me about a Bavarian policeman who stopped someone for reckless driving and, instead of ticketing the man, sold him a copy of a Hubbard book. In another reported incident, a Berlin police official asked job applicants to take the Scientology personality test, then brought the results to a Scientology facility to evaluate them on a computer. He was suspended and ordered to pay a \$7,0900 fine. The case is on appeal.

Corea sued the state and lost. The judge reportedly asked him if a “world-famous pianist like him” needs state subsidies. It should be pointed out, however, that the arts in Germany are heavily subsidized by the state. When an artist is blacklisted, he or she could have a hard time surviving. Chick Corea did recently play in Germany at a concert subsidized in part by the state.

Though some lawsuits have been filed in Germany by Scientologists, with mixed results, the organization’s most aggressive response has been to launch the international ad campaign. German officials were, of course, mortified by the stark comparisons to the country’s Nazi past. “It’s a distortion,” protested Germany’s ambassador to the U.S., Juergen Chrobog, citing a I.R.S. State Department statement calling the ad’s language “needlessly provocative.” The comparisons also angered some Jewish leaders. “It’s either out of complete ignorance of Nazi Germany or a conscious and deliberate abuse of that experience for their own purpose,” says Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith.

At a minimum, some Germans believe that Scientology is abusing legitimate grievance for public-relations gain. In May 1996, for example, the church’s publishing arm sent a letter to German booksellers in which it cited “official praise of the Church of Scientology from the American President, Bill Clinton.” After requesting clarification from Washington, indignant German officials received assurances from the State Department that the president had made no such comments. When I ask Weber about it, she faxes me several pages from a Scientology magazine. They contain what appear to be generic campaign statements about drug-abuse policy from Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, with no mention of Scientology whatsoever.

When I return to the United States, I phone the writer Gore Vidal, who was one of the signers of the open letter to Helmut Kohl in the *International Herald Tribune*. “It’s got me into endless trouble in Germany,” he sighs. “I had been led to believe by Bert Fields, my lawyer—he asked would I put my name to it—that it was a civil liberties gesture, not approbation of Scientology as a religion or a scam. I regard it as the second, personally, but then I’m not an authority.” Vidal says he agreed to sign when he was told that children of Scientologists were barred from kindergartens. And, Vidal wants it known, he once met Hubbard in the 1950s, when Scientology was in its infancy. “He exuded evil, malice, and stupidity,” says the historical novelist, “but perfectly amiable to talk to.”

Though it’s unclear whether the ad campaign had any effect, Scientology scored a major victory in January when the U.S. State Department issued its annual international human rights report. Among the report’s survey of notable developments around the world, it mentions “the sharp debate surround [ing] the activities of the Church of Scientology, whose members allege both government-condoned and societal harassment.” Though it contains no outright condemnation of German actions, the report lists, in carefully neutral language, German measure taken against Scientology.

The State Department argues that it is compelled to speak out, since some German policies have affected U.S. citizens, such as Chick Corea. “Mind you, there’s no defense of Scientology here,” says Steven Coffey, of the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. “It is simply the fact that the German government has, for reasons that are totally unclear, decided to take action against a group that it itself said has committed no criminal acts.” The impact of the report was subsequently undermined when the new secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, called the Scientology ads “distasteful and historically inadequate” and called the report “a subject that needs to be worked out.”

Several members of Congress, including representatives Donald Payne of New Jersey and Cynthia McKinney of Georgia, have criticized German policy, some after being contacted by celebrity Scientologists. McKinney was alerted to the situation by the singer Isaac Hayes. "I don't know much about Scientology, but I do know about Isaac Hayes," she says. "What I've been told by [him] is that the Scientologists provide discipline for success and that the methods that are used to train and organize the mind are quite applicable to inner-city settings, where young people need to develop that same discipline. I haven't gone to the next step with Mr. Hayes, but certainly we need to look at opportunities for young people."

Despite the public relations nightmare, German officials are determined to continue on what they feel is a just, if risky, course. "It is our responsibility to inform... and to guard the people against [the Scientology organization]—of course, within legal limits," says Peter Hausmann, a spokesman for the German government.

Numerous other governments have begun investigating Scientology, including Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Last November a court in Lyons, France, convicted a prominent Scientologist of involuntary homicide in connection with the suicide of a member who couldn't pay for Scientology courses. In December an Italian court sentenced 29 Scientologists to jail for "criminal association." And in January, police in Clearwater reopened a case of a Scientologist who died under mysterious circumstances at a Scientology hotel in 1995 after she told her parents she planned to leave the group.

In Germany, debate grows more lively over what is the appropriate degree of government response. Last fall, a former minister of justice declared that the state should be more restrained in its dealings with Scientology. Anne Fuhle, who investigates sects in Berlin, agrees. "It seems that the U.S. is more easygoing," she says, "I feel it should be more easygoing here. I think it's necessary to deal with it on a solid, unemotional bases." Then she turns to her mounds of complaints about Scientology and plows in.

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